

## Simone Weil: An Instructive Paradox

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——矛盾の生涯と逆説のキリスト論——

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**Summary:** The brief yet remarkable life of Simone Weil (1909–1943) is characterized by words and actions which take us by surprise, being sometimes more and sometimes less than we might desire. Her work is replete with seeming contradictions, some of which were no doubt as disturbing for her contemporaries as they are for readers today. As T. S. Eliot notes, when one reads her works, one “is struck, here and there, by a contrast between an almost superhuman humility and what appears to be an almost outrageous arrogance.”<sup>1</sup>

Living during a time of war and upheaval, and suffering herself from generally poor health and from severe migraines which plagued her almost unceasingly during her adult life, Weil perhaps understandably focused much attention on what she called *malheur* or affliction. On the one hand, she was committed to knowing the reality of oppressed workers and to struggling to help improve their lot; yet, on the other, she sometimes seemed to crave suffering for herself. In her “Spiritual Autobiography,” she confessed, “...every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy.”<sup>2</sup> With her focus on self-renunciation, Weil at first seems an unlikely model for women today who are seeking to liberate themselves from oppressive structures in society and in the church. Yet, a careful study of Weil’s reflections on Christology sheds light on the contradictions and suggests that the paradox of Simone Weil may indeed have a great deal to offer feminist movements today.

## Introduction

Simone Weil (1909–1943), a French philosopher, social activist, and political and religious thinker, is perhaps best described as a modern paradox. On the first page of his 1990 book about Weil, David McLellan highlights the apparent contradictions which filled her life:

Certainly there are few lives which involve as much paradox as hers: born into a comfortable bourgeois family, she became a fanatical supporter of the proletariat; a pacifist, she fought in the Spanish Civil War; a Jew, attracted to Christianity, she refused to join the Church because of its adherence to the Old Testament; she wrote a lot—and beautifully—about love, but abhorred all physical contact with her fellows; her outlook on life and politics was sombre, even pessimistic, yet she was ever ready to propagate utopian schemes for the reformation of society; finally, she abjured her splendid gifts by refusing existence itself and her death was caused, at least partially, by self-starvation.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing the contradictions in her life, T. S. Eliot observes that “many readers, coming for the first time upon some assertion likely to arouse intellectual incredulity or emotional antagonism, might be deterred from improving their acquaintance with a great soul and a brilliant mind.” He continues on to offer some wise advice: “Simone Weil needs patience from her readers, as she doubtless needed patience from the friends who most admired and appreciated her.”<sup>4</sup> It is with patience that I wish to explore the life and thought of this controversial woman who has been labeled everything from a “male-identified masochist” to a woman of great “intellect and insight.”<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction to *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*, Richard H. Bell notes that the incompleteness of Weil's writing and life (she died at age 34) “invite[s] readers to complete them through themselves—through the appropriation of her many insights into their own lives. The reader is forced to ‘read’ his or her *self* relative to the very specific circumstances in which he or she lives, or relative to concrete actions that are being undertaken.”<sup>6</sup> We must think *along with* Weil, yet also, as J. B. Hall affirms, “. . . if she is to continue to remain a

fertile resource we must think beyond her as well.”<sup>7</sup> Although all that Weil wrote can not be salvaged, it is the task of this paper to begin to appropriate and *think beyond* her insights from the perspective of women living in today’s technologically advanced age.

In the first part of this short paper, I will introduce both Weil’s life and related aspects of her thought, drawing especially from her letters<sup>8</sup> and from the biography written by her friend Simone Pétrement.<sup>9</sup> In the second part, I will investigate an important aspect of Weil’s thought, namely her understanding of Christology, which is bound tightly with her understanding of *maleur* or affliction. Finally, I will suggest that a “patient” look at Weil can enable us to see some of the contributions she can make to feminist movements within society and within the church today.

## **PART I: Simone Weil’s Life and Thought**

In this section, I will investigate Simone Weil’s life and writings together because, despite the clear contradictions, Weil is a notable example of one who sincerely struggled to achieve consistency between her thought and action.<sup>10</sup> This introduction is only a rough sketch intended primarily to make clear the “disturbing” elements of her life and thought.<sup>11</sup>

Although many of Weil’s writings have been published and subsequently translated into English, it is impossible to offer a summary of them for several reasons. First, the majority of her writings were published posthumously and many are more thoughts and reflections than well-developed theories. As Eliot suggests, “The fragmentation of the extracts [in this case of *Gravity and Grace*] elicits the profound insights and the startling originality [like Pascal], but suggests that hers was a mind of occasional flashes of inspiration.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, her early death will always leave us uncertain about how she *may* have developed her thought or *may* have reconciled some of the inconsistencies. More importantly, though, it is impossible to sum up clearly Weil’s thoughts because throughout her life she eluded simple classification. As McLellan states in his introduction, “[S]he remains unclassifiable—and therefore perpetually unsettling.”<sup>13</sup> The paradox in her life and work disappears only by means of the dishonesty of the reader, as it is, I believe, an integral part of her message. She herself offers the following method of intellectual investigation: “As soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true.”<sup>14</sup> As she explains, the

perception of contradiction leads to a higher plane and a new view: "If I am walking on the side of a mountain, I can see first a lake, then, after a few steps, a forest. I have to choose either the lake or the forest. If I want to see both the lake and the forest as once, I have to climb higher."<sup>15</sup> For Weil, though, the upward motion comes only from being drawn up. It is the work of grace.

### **Background**

Simone Weil was born into a well-established family in Paris on February 3, 1909. Both her father, Dr. Bernard Weil, and her mother, Mme. Selma Weil, were Jews, but they did not educate Simone or her elder brother André about their Jewish background. In other areas, however, education was very important for the Weil family. Simone and her brother were surrounded by books and showed themselves to be bright at an early age. Physically, though, Simone was often sickly and always somewhat weak and clumsy. These limitations did not, however, prevent her from offering herself for physically difficult and dangerous jobs later in her life.

Throughout her youth and perhaps throughout her life, Weil seemed to suffer from a feeling of inferiority, perhaps in part because her brother was recognized early in his life for his gift in mathematics. Early on she also perceived a great disadvantage or misfortune in having been born a woman. According to Pétrement, Weil, in an effort to further her goals in life, "decided to reduce this obstacle by giving up any desire to think of herself as a woman or to be regarded as such by others, at least for a set period of time."<sup>16</sup> She and her family all joked about her being the second son in her family. Mme. Weil apparently had great expectations of her children and was at least partially responsible for Weil's understanding of the misfortune of being female. Speaking about one young girl she had met, Mme. Weil wrote, "This is the kind of little girl I have come across many times, the kind that leads me to like and esteem boys much more! ... I do my best to encourage in Simone not the simpering graces of a little girl but the forthrightness of a boy, even if this must at times seem rude."<sup>17</sup> In embracing traditional masculine virtues, Weil was most importantly liberating herself from limiting and unfavorable images of women. Nevertheless, her embrace of male language and masculine virtues rather than the redefining of the female in positive terms may leave women today still searching for a liberating model of a woman.

When Weil entered the prestigious Lycée Henri IV in October 1925 at age

sixteen, she met Emile-Auguste Chartier, better known as Alain, a professor who had lasting impact upon her thought. In 1928 she entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure, having already passed the examinations required for a license to teach philosophy. Over time she confirmed her early admiration of the Greeks in general and her love for Plato in particular. (She also developed a rather unbalanced hatred for Rome and Israel.<sup>18</sup>) Her training as a philosopher greatly influenced her later “Christian” writings. McLellan notes that her language and structure were philosophical even when she was writing about her religious experience: “[S]he expressed herself in categories largely unfamiliar to those brought up in the Christian milieu. Moreover these categories are often apparently contradictory: Weil purposely used contradiction as a method for transcending a particular and limited perspective.”<sup>19</sup>

During her years as a student, she began to voice her concern for working people openly. She was recognized for her remarkable sensitivity to the plight of suffering human beings, yet at the same time her classmates seem to have sensed something lacking in her. Pétrement even goes so far as to suggest that “many of her old classmates, when they finally read her writings, were surprised to discover that she was so human.”<sup>20</sup> While Weil admitted her need for friendship and indeed had friends, she did not always find among those around her the “ideal friend” she desired. In response, at age fifteen, she had “conjured up the figure of a distant, hidden, secret friend who she thought would be revealed to her one day” and made reference to this “ideal friend” later in life. True friendship was for her akin to a miracle.<sup>21</sup>

Weil’s intense headaches began around 1930, during her last year as a student, while she was preparing for an exam to secure a teaching position at a lycée or university. These headaches continued with almost no relief for most of her adult life. It was perhaps this severe physical suffering coupled with her feelings of inadequacy and her self-isolation that contributed to her later emphasis on affliction. Much later she wrote to her friend Maurice Schumann about her intellectual vocation: “I have the inner certainty that this truth, if it is ever granted to me, will only be revealed when I myself am physically in affliction, and in one of the extreme forms in which it exists at present.”<sup>22</sup> Here, as well as in the earlier years of her life, we can see that while she “was convinced she had a powerful intellectual vocation to which she had to remain obedient and faithful at all cost,” she also had “an attitude of utter humility, even a sense of total worthlessness.”<sup>23</sup>

In 1931 Weil started teaching at the lycée for girls at Le Puy. She was sent by

the government to this provincial place in large part because of her involvement with workers during her student days. In such a small place, some thought her political activity might decrease. It did not. She was successful in her teaching but caused a scandal when she met with the unemployed and was seen shaking hands with a stone-breaker. In response Weil wrote an article entitled "A Survival of the Caste System" in which she accused the national university administration of lagging "several thousand years behind human civilization."<sup>24</sup> The scandal resulted in her transfer to a girls' lycée in Auxerre in 1932.

In contrast to the love she could show toward all social classes, Weil was herself cautious about love. In a 1935 letter to a former student, she advised:

I will add that love seems to me to involve an even more terrifying risk than that of blindly pledging one's own existence; I mean the risk, if one is the object of a profound love, of becoming the arbiter of another human existence. My conclusion . . . is not that one should avoid love, but that one should not seek it, and above all when one is very young.<sup>25</sup>

Although Weil's letters to her parents and the time she spent with them offer evidence of her ability to express her love and human dependence to some degree, these examples are very limited. She seemed fearful of love. In a 1942 letter addressed to her friend Gustave Thibon after their parting, Weil wrote, "I also like to think . . . that if you should sometimes happen to think of me you will do so as one thinks of a book one read in childhood. I do not want ever to occupy a different place from that in the hearts of those I love, because then I can be sure of never causing them any unhappiness."<sup>26</sup> She herself had clearly been disappointed by her friendships. Ursula King is justified in posing the question: "In spite of all her praises of love, of love of neighbor and friend, and in spite of all her sympathies and work for the poor, her abnegations and deprivations for the sake of others, does one not wonder whether in the end her ethical rigorism did not condemn her to be a person with not enough love, not enough compassion, least for herself and those closest to her?"<sup>27</sup>

In 1934 Weil took a leave from teaching (then at the girls' lycée in Roanne) and began unskilled factory work. She had wished for such as experience for some time. While working in the factory, she experienced degradation and slavery. Her unsuitability for the work led to low production, low pay, and hunger. Yet, although she

suffered from her clumsiness and inaptness for the labor, the greater suffering was of a different kind. In Weil's words, working in a factory "meant that all the external reasons (which I had previously thought internal) upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, was based were radically destroyed within two or three weeks by the daily experience of brutal constraint."<sup>28</sup> Such an experience brought out in her the unexpected: docility, a word rarely used to describe Weil. She worked consciously to reclaim her human dignity based on something internal, yet she still felt that, "There I received forever the mark of slavery . . . . Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave."<sup>29</sup> This experience certainly informed her later writings about true affliction.

In August 1936 Weil travelled to Barcelona with plans to enlist in the ongoing Spanish Civil War. She stayed about two months, unsuccessful in her attempt to join the fighting. A cooking accident forced her to return, with the aide of her unceasingly attentive parents, to France. There she later changed her mind about joining the fighting. In explanation of this conversion she wrote, "I no longer felt any compulsion to participate in a war which, instead of being what it had appeared when it began—a war of famished peasants against landed proprietors and their clerical supporters—had become a war between Russia on the one hand and Germany and Italy on the other."<sup>30</sup> Again we see evidence of her commitment to workers.

In 1938 Weil visited Portugal with her parents and in Solesmes had her first mystical experience. She later wrote about this experience in a letter to a soldier, Joë Bousquet, who had been paralyzed during World War I:

For twelve years I have suffered from pain around the central point of the nervous system, the meeting-place of soul and body; this pain persists during sleep and has never stopped for a second. . . . During all this time, the word God had no place at all in my thoughts. It never had, until the day—about three and a half years ago—when I could no longer keep it out. At a moment of intense physical pain, while I was making the effort to love, although believing I had no right to give any name to the love, I felt, while completely unprepared for it (I had never read the mystics), a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being; it was inaccessible both to sense and imagination, and it resembled the love that irradiates the tenderest smile of somebody one loves. Since that moment, the name of God and the name of Christ have

been more and more irresistibly mingled with my thoughts.<sup>31</sup>

From that point on, Weil turned her thoughts and writings more and more toward religious themes, studying such texts as the writings of John of the Cross, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Upanishads.

From 1935 to 1940 Weil had various teaching assignments yet also took several leaves because of ill health. In 1940 when she tried to get reappointed to a teaching position, the Vichy government had already issued the "Statute on Jews" which forbade Jews to be employed at schools. She was therefore dismissed from the state teaching service. Her response was a letter to the Minister of Education in which she claimed she did not know the meaning of *Jew*. The law spelled out that anyone who had three Jewish grandparents was a Jew, but she said she did not know how to assess the Jewishness of her grandparents. She wrote, "I have no reason to suppose that I have any sort of tie, either through my father or my mother, with the people who lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago . . ."<sup>32</sup> Although most commentators recognize the sarcastic tone in which Weil wrote, this realization does not make us feel at ease with her statements, even less so when combined with the other things she wrote about Judaism during a time of Jewish persecution and Holocaust.

In 1941 Weil met a Dominican priest, Fr. Perrin, and through his connection began farm work in Ardèche under the direction of Gustave Thibon. Despite her increasing interest in Christianity, particularly Catholicism, she refused to be baptized. First, she considered herself "Christian" from her childhood and perhaps thought it unnecessary to seek baptism, an action she felt would distance herself from other traditions and their followers. Also, as with her rejection of womanhood, Judaism, and the Communist Party, Weil seemed to resist becoming a part of a defined group, perhaps because of her fear of later rejection from the very group itself. (She was interested in knowing if she would, in fact, be accepted for baptism.) She also considered herself particularly vulnerable to group pressures. In addition, her interpretation of the Old Testament was another major barrier. While the church embraces the Hebrew Scriptures as a foundation of Christianity, Weil wrote that only a few books, those which she considered to be inspired through foreign influences—Job, most of the Psalms, the Song of Songs, wisdom literature, Second Isaiah, some minor prophets, Daniel and Tobias, were worthwhile. According to her, "All the rest of the Old Testament is a tissue of horrors."<sup>33</sup>



In 1942 Weil left France for the United States. From New York, where she lived with her parents, Weil tried desperately to get to England, from where she hoped eventually to be able to return to France. After “a very painful inner struggle” and in spite of her “pacifist inclinations” it had become imperative for her “to work for Hitler’s destruction, with or without any chance of success.”<sup>34</sup> During this year she wrote several letters to Schumann, sharing with him some of her ideas, including her somewhat shocking “Plan for an Organization of Front-Line Nurses,” and seeking his assistance. Admitting that she had no skilled labor to offer, she offered herself for any work “involving a high degree of hardship and danger,” including that as a front-line nurse. She explained, “The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way I can revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting for myself a large share of danger and hardship. That is a necessary condition before I can exert my capacity for work.”<sup>35</sup> Her insistence on placing herself and perhaps others in danger, either from offering her clumsy self for dangerous missions or from depriving her body of proper nourishment, is among the most “disturbing” aspects of her life.

In 1943, at the request of the Free French, Weil wrote *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, a report about the possibilities for the recovery of France. In it she described eloquently “those needs which are for the life of the soul what the needs in the way of food, sleep and warmth are for the life of the body.”<sup>36</sup> Academic work could not, however, satisfy her desire to participate in the Free French in a more physically demanding way. Stuck behind a desk in London, she soon found herself suffering from tuberculosis and exhaustion in addition to her acute disappointment. After some months in the hospital, Weil died on August 24, 1943, in Ashford, Kent. According to the doctors, she contributed to her death by refusing proper nutrition. It was probably in that year that she wrote another letter to Schumann in which she spoke of her life as meaningful only insofar as it helped others or led to the “revelation of truth.” She expressed her growing despair: “I feel an ever increasing sense of devastation, both in my intellect and in the centre of my heart, at my inability to think with truth at the same time about the affliction of men, the perfection of God, and the link between the two.”<sup>37</sup> If unable to return to France, she wished to “be allowed to disappear in the obscurity of physical labour,” for she could not “eat the bread of the English without taking part in their war effort.”<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps all scholars recognize Weil’s preoccupation with food. Throughout her

life she did not eat much, though she enjoyed good French food and even requested a French cook during her last days in the hospital. She also often used food imagery in her writing, and, interestingly, her final reflections in her notebook were about food. She wrote about “the significance of meals on solemn occasions” and “the significance of special dishes,” citing several specific examples. The second to last sentence of her final notebook reads: “The joy and the spiritual significance of the feast is situated within the special delicacy.”<sup>39</sup> Despite this preoccupation, most commentators have, I think rightly, refused to classify Weil as anorexic.<sup>40</sup> While her death is striking and somewhat tragic—a life of potential before her (Eliot remarks that “she had a very great soul to grow up to.”<sup>41</sup>) as she chose to die—her death very much reflected her life. She died as she lived: in solidarity with the suffering in France, in relative obscurity, and in contradiction.

### Observations

Although in the preceding discussion I have pointed out some “disturbing” aspects of Weil’s life and thought, I would like to highlight them here briefly and contrast them with the foundations of what I shall call feminist liberation theologies. It is important to note at the outset that the term *feminist* is a somewhat elusive term, taking on a variety of different meanings in different historical and cultural contexts. It is impossible to speak of *one* feminist movement or *one* feminist liberation theology, as each takes form in response to particular problems facing people, especially women and other marginalized groups, in specific areas of the world. Nevertheless, there are some very basic foundations which I offer here to make clearer my observations about the life and writings of Weil.

While no single definition can be fully satisfactory, the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* offers the following broad yet helpful explanation under the heading of “Feminist Theories”:

... feminist theories interrogate structures of male dominance and of patriarchy, and their accompanying systems of gender. In examining patriarchy, feminist theories expose the structures, such as class, race, religion, sexuality, and nationality, that subordinate and oppress women. The result of such examinations has been the generation of knowledge on subjects such as female bodies, violence against women, patriarchal states, the socialization of con-

sciousness, heterosexism, and male-dominant cultures.<sup>42</sup>

The very basic goal of feminist theories, therefore, is the understanding of and freedom from oppressive structures within society which deny women and other marginalized people from recognizing their full humanity and from participating in and contributing to the world around them. However, as feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether points out in her investigation into the life of ascetic women of the fourth century, "What individuals find 'liberating' is relative." In this paper, therefore, I do not want to question whether Weil herself experienced liberation, that is, "the sense of taking charge of one's own life; of rejecting a state of being governed and defined by others."<sup>43</sup> Instead I wish to comment on implications for women living today.

First, Weil is most clearly aligned with feminist liberation movements in her demonstrated solidarity with laborers. In her work in the factories and the field, she sought to understand people, to establish comradeship with them rather than give money from her privileged status. Although Weil did use dualisms in her writings, notably the distinction between the "here below" and the "heavens," the common critique that such dualisms minister to the spirit while allowing the body to wither does not find support in the life of Weil. While she would not pray for bread,<sup>44</sup> she did fight for the right to work for bread. As Lucy Bregman notes, "it would be impossible to show that Weil's earthly-heavenly dichotomy led to less concern for the plight of factory workers or farm laborers."<sup>45</sup>

Beyond this, however, Weil in many ways appears "separated by a deep and enormous chasm from contemporary feminist theology and religious thought."<sup>46</sup> From a feminist perspective, perhaps the most troubling points of both her life and thought are related to her sense of worthlessness and her seeming desire for suffering. Concretely she rejected herself as a woman and as a Jew, somewhat looking down on both groups. Further, her writings give testimony to her own sense of worthlessness. Feminist ears cannot but hear some of her words as frighteningly similar to descriptions of the cycle of domestic abuse today. For example, she described a mystical experience months before her death in the following way:

One day he said to me: "Now go." I fell down before him, I clasped his knees, I implored him not to drive me away. But he threw me out on the stairs . . . I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep

down within me something, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of all, he loves me.<sup>47</sup>

Similar images run throughout her work. For instance, she identifies herself with the cursed fig tree in the New Testament (Matthew 21:18-19; Mark 11:12-14).<sup>48</sup> Fearing that her thoughts “might be condemned to death through the contagion of [her] inadequacy and wretchedness,” she wrote, “I never read the story of the barren fig tree without trembling. I think that it is a portrait of me. In it also, nature was powerless, and yet it was not excused. Christ cursed it.”<sup>49</sup> Such images of unworthiness and powerlessness, especially when transferred to the earthly realm for articulation, seem to be precisely those rejected by feminists today.

Speaking little of her original God-given dignity and worth or of future glory in the Resurrection, Weil wrote that Christianity was essentially the religion of slaves. Feminists and other liberation theologians emphasize the promise of exodus and the justice ministry of Jesus while Weil concentrated on the reality of exile “here below.” For her the core meaning of Christ could be found in his true affliction on the cross. While liberation theologians often discuss salvation in the context of fullness of life in the here and now—“No salvation outside this world”—Weil announced that “Salvation is consenting to die.”<sup>50</sup> Stating the obvious, we must be attentive to the fact that slave/servant language has been and is problematic for those who suffer. As PHEME PERKINS points out, “[T]he exhortation to suffer like Christ in expectation of future salvation was frequently used to admonish Christian women and slaves to submit to abusive husbands or masters (e.g., 1 Peter 2:18-3:6).”<sup>51</sup> Proscribed powerlessness for the powerless cannot easily be understood as “good news.”

Bregman notes that while feminist theologians look to uncover women models in the tradition, they seek “models of health, strength, and liberation, rather than a pattern of self-immolation, fanatical purity, and extreme denial of the body.”<sup>52</sup> How then can Weil be a positive model for women today?

## **PART II: Perfect Affliction, Perfect Joy**

After her death, Weil was popularized perhaps primarily through the publication of *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*. I will draw significantly from these two collections in this second part since they contain much of her writings on religious

themes.<sup>53</sup> I will take a close look at a significant aspect of her religious thought, namely *maleur* or affliction, which is tied to her Christology and is therefore foundational for her understanding of Creation, the Cross, and the Trinity. These ideas are among Weil's most important religious thoughts and, at the same time, are among the most troubling from a feminist theological perspective. A deeper understanding of these ideas will lead us into the instructiveness of the paradox of Simone Weil.

### ***Maleur* (Affliction)**

*Maleur* or true affliction directs and permeates much of Weil's religious thought. For her the existence of human suffering, physical pain, is not a "great enigma" since human villains and nature are present in our world. However, "it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and to take possession of them as their sovereign lord."<sup>54</sup> True affliction always includes physical pain, but it penetrates deeper and embraces all aspects of our lives. Affliction makes it seem that God is absent and causes us to cry out against God as Job did from his dunghill and as Christ did from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). In the preface to his book on Weil's theology, Thomas Indinopolos writes that when he was doing research about suffering, he sought out the essays of Weil, only to discover that "Simone Weil does not solve the problem of suffering but deepens it, forcing us to perceive the mystery in it—that which is truly abysmal."<sup>55</sup>

For Weil, however, true and *unconsoled* affliction is not just "abysmal"; it is necessary in the process of attaining total detachment and receiving the "ineffable" consolation which comes from God. For her, "The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it."<sup>56</sup> She came to understand how in freedom one could continue to love in affliction, in God's seeming absence. While it is the nature of affliction that "all the scorn, revulsion, and hatred are turned inward," Weil writes that supernatural love can prevent the penetration of this hatred to "the center of the soul" where it would "color the whole universe with [its] poisoned light."<sup>57</sup> Love, therefore, lays the foundation for liberation. In her own life Christ's Passion entered into her and took possession of her while she was reciting George Herbert's poem "Love" during an intense headache. She described the experience as having nothing to do with her imagination or senses. Simply, "I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence

of love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face.”<sup>58</sup>

Loving in affliction, that is, the union of sorrow and joy, “involves a wrenching apart.”<sup>59</sup> It is accompanied by great suffering and is possible only through a process of detachment. Experiencing the absence of God, thinking that perhaps he does not even exist, we must continue to love. It is then that God will reveal himself, as in the tender smile that transformed Weil’s suffering without removing it.

### **Creation and Decreation**

In order to understand the development of Weil’s thought of freedom to love in affliction and its relationship to the Cross and the Trinity, it is necessary to begin with an exploration of her understanding of Creation and “decreation.” The Cross, perfect affliction, and the Trinity, perfect joy, are the two poles of Christianity, “the only two keys which give entry to the realm of purity, where one can breathe,”<sup>60</sup> but each is understandable only in the context of Creation.

For Weil, self-renunciation is basic in the lives of God and Jesus, and therefore in the lives of Christian disciples. In her understanding of Christianity, the activity of self-giving did not begin with the Incarnation when Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” nor with the Crucifixion when he “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (cf. Philippians 2:4–8). Creation itself was already sacrifice, for as Lucien Richard writes in his book *A Kenotic Christology*, “Kenosis, the self-emptying and self-giving that is love’s essence, and that characterizes Jesus’ life, is above all to be understood as characteristic of the life of God.”<sup>61</sup> Weil writes:

On God’s part creation is not an act of self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. God and all his creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of his being from himself . . . . By this creative act he denied himself, as Christ told us to deny ourselves. God denied himself for our sakes in order to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for him.<sup>62</sup>

The human response to God’s creative act is what Weil calls “decreation.” God created us so that we might give ourselves back to him through a similar process of self-denial or self-renunciation. God gave us imaginary divinity so that we might

follow his model and empty ourselves. Freedom from a false divinity means letting go of an image of ourselves as the center of the world. By giving ourselves to God we allow God to become everything once again. While Weil can not understand God's necessity to love her, especially since she felt that even human affection for her could "only be a mistake," she imagines that God "loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am."<sup>63</sup> She feels she had to withdraw so that God can see that perspective. Taking this model one step further, she startlingly writes, "I am God's abdication. The more I exist, the more God abdicates. So if I take God's side rather than my own I ought to regard my existence as a diminution, a decrease."<sup>64</sup>

### **The Cross**

With this framework in place, we may move to one pole of Christianity—the Cross. For Weil the Crucifixion was not the natural outcome of the ministry of Jesus, as it is for many feminist liberation theologians, but was "ridiculous." It was the ultimate contradiction. In contrast, the death of the martyrs was not ridiculous—they felt the presence of God until their death and knew why they were suffering. The Crucifixion, however, was true affliction, an event that seizes life and "attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical."<sup>65</sup> Unlike the martyrs but like a common human being, Christ was driven to ask that "this cup" might pass from him (Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42), to seek consolation from his friends, and to believe that he was abandoned by God. Nevertheless, in the darkness and the emptiness of the seeming absence of God, Christ continued to love. God's seeming absence becomes final and definitive only if we cease to love.

In the first action of self-limitation, "God created through love and for love. God did not create except love itself, and the means to love."<sup>66</sup> Yet our experiences confirm that there is no love without suffering. In light of her understanding of the love present at Creation, Weil defines the Crucifixion as the "infinite distance between God and God," the "supreme tearing apart," the "agony beyond all others," and the "marvel of love."<sup>67</sup> For a person who loves, separation is a good for it is revelation of the love of the relationship. The "agony beyond all others" is the "marvel of love." She writes that if we remain faithful and attentive at the foot of the cross, resisting the temptation to turn our eyes away from the horrible sight, "our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father."<sup>68</sup>

We must not allow ourselves to focus on the imaginary presence of God. Again using food imagery, she writes, "Hunger: We imagine kinds of food, but the hunger itself is real; we have to fasten onto the hunger."<sup>69</sup> Weil refuses the consolation that illusions may provide.

In a way the character of Joy Gresham in *Shadowlands*,<sup>70</sup> the novel about C. S. Lewis' marriage late in life, echoes Weil on this point. When Joy struggles to convince C. S. "Jack" Lewis to talk about her imminent death from cancer, Jack responds, "We shouldn't think about that now. Let's not spoil the time we have together" (238). Seeing Jack's denial of the real clearly in his response, she answers, "Jack, it doesn't spoil it. It makes it real" (*Ibid.*). She speaks the bitter truth that "the pain, then, is part of the happiness now . . . That's the deal" (239). That was apparently the "deal" that Weil understood well as she wrote: "But, as a matter of fact, pleasure and pain are inseparable companions."<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, though, Weil also seems to have had much in common with Jack, a brilliant Oxford professor and lover of Greek and Latin authors, whose beautiful ideas and writings about love (love whose "joy lies not in the having, but in the desiring" [29]) seem to have kept him safely from loving. Losing his mother as a young boy, Jack learned the danger of loving and responded by embracing love in its two "superior" forms: as *Charis*, divine grace, and as *Agape*, the love for humankind. However, he rejected "the mischievous God Eros" who was for Jack "too messy and inconvenient" (6). After more than fifty years of safe living, Jack is surprised and awakened by Joy and finally takes the chance and loves. Though Joy soon succumbs to cancer, Jack's life remains richer than it had before Joy entered his life. After her death he writes: "Why love, if losing hurts so much? I have no answers anymore, only the life I've lived. Twice in that life I've been given the choice, as a boy, and as a man. The boy chose safety. The man chooses suffering" (263). Weil's life, perhaps, ended too early.

### The Trinity

The second pole of Christianity for Weil is the Trinity, perfect joy. Interestingly, Weil speaks little of the Resurrection as event. For her the exaltation in Philippians 2 seems to take the form of a relationship rather than an event. The Trinity is the very love or friendship between God and God, this love itself being also God. While the Crucifixion makes manifest the separation, the Trinity is an expression of the meeting



or infinite closeness of God and God. Both are “forms expressing the divine virtue of the same Love, the Love that is God himself.”<sup>72</sup>

While there are some important differences between perfect joy and perfect affliction, the differences are for Weil less important than the similarities. In explanation she writes, “When a man who can and a man who cannot read look at a sentence written in red ink, they both see the same red color, but this color is not so important for the one as for the other.”<sup>73</sup> For the one who cannot understand the message, the color of the writing takes on importance, but for the one who can “read,” the color of the experience, joy or affliction, has little significance. To make the point again with different imagery: “Bread and stone both come from Christ and penetrating to our inward being bring Christ into us. Bread and stone are love. We must eat the bread and lay ourselves open to the stone, so that it may sink as deeply as possible into our flesh.”<sup>74</sup> It is the message of love that is of consequence, not the means of delivery.

### **Observations**

As explained above, Weil’s sense of worthlessness and her apparent desire for suffering are difficult to incorporate into feminist theologies which strive to empower the marginalized, to help them recover their human dignity, thereby moving them in the direction of concrete liberation. The first point to emphasize is that while Weil is attentive to the necessity of emptying the self of false divinity, nevertheless she clearly condemns abusive power and affirms that such renunciation requires free consent. She distinguishes clearly between a false humility which “leads us to believe that we are nothing in so far as we are . . . particular human beings,” and true humility which “is the knowledge that we are nothing in so far as we are human beings as such.”<sup>75</sup> We are all called to empty ourselves; no one is called to empty another. For her, part of the tragedy of the oppressed is that, stripped of their humanity, they are also denied the opportunity to renounce themselves for God. What is destroyed in them cannot be decreated. Self-emptying is an action of obedience, but that “obedience must, however, be obedience to necessity and not to force (terrible void in the case of slaves).”<sup>76</sup> Weil’s life and writings clearly demonstrate that according to her understanding, decreation “is a strictly personal matter: . . . one does not decreate others, it is an affair between the solitary soul and the source of all goodness, and so it is impossible to treat others as one must treat oneself.”<sup>77</sup> In fact, a decreated soul is most inclined toward loving the neighbor.

Further, Weil recognizes the difficult truth that authentic and complete liberation cannot be solely a human endeavor. We may give bread to one who is hungry, but it is the manner of giving that makes it possible for Christ to enter into the one who eats the bread. "If the gift is rightly given and rightly received, the passing of a morsel of bread from one man to another is something like real communion."<sup>78</sup> In such action we participate in God's creation. It is not something we can do alone:

It is sometimes easy to deliver an unhappy man from his present distress, but it is difficult to set him free from his past affliction. Only God can do it. And even the grace of God itself cannot cure irremediably wounded natures here below. The glorified body bore the marks of the nail and spear.<sup>79</sup>

Weil recognizes the depth of human brokenness and the limits of human action. She sees further that only self-giving action can give life to another and allow the one to share in the affliction of the other. Weil understands that this renunciation goes against the nature both of one who has not known affliction and of one "who had known or had a foretaste of affliction and whom it fills with horror."<sup>80</sup> Yet, in imitation of God, we are called to refrain from using all the power we possess. As Weil notes, "This is contrary to all the laws of nature. Grace alone can do it."<sup>81</sup>

Though Weil's life and thought speak more directly about the Cross, perfect affliction, than about the Trinity, perfect joy, it is important to repeat that for her speaking of the one was speaking of the other. They are both part of the decreation process that leads the human person to discover reality.

## Conclusion

After having taken a broad look at the sometimes "disturbing" life and thought of Simone Weil and having made a closer investigation of her understanding of true affliction and its relationship to perfect joy, I would like to end by returning to the question of the instructiveness of the paradox of Weil. Can we respond positively to Robert Coles' assertion that for "us who try to figure out how to live our lives—what values and beliefs to uphold, what actions to pursue—[Weil's] example . . . can serve to focus the mind, enlarge the heart, and stir the soul."<sup>82</sup> Though a particularly complex challenge for women who align themselves fundamentally with feminist

liberation theologies, the contradictions of Weil do indeed invite us to a new level of understanding.

As King notes, there is much that feminists cannot accept in Weil: "the fierce intellectualism unattenuated by the tenderness of human emotions; the proud individualism without the enriching and supporting web of personal relationships; the marked dualism and the obsessive concern with suffering and affliction."<sup>83</sup> Yet, a "patient" reading of Weil reveals a woman who challenges us to think about important questions and forbids us to rest in easy answers. In some ways the world of this gifted young woman might be far from ours. In terms of religious thinking, for example, she was unaided by the significant work of Vatican II<sup>84</sup> as well as by that of more recent liberation and feminist theologians. The Catholic Church still clearly strove to separate itself from the world, including other religions, and women were not commonly recognized as a group with distinct problems worth investigating. Yet, in other ways her chaotic world of war, abusive power, and human suffering is not so distant from our own. Recognizing and responding to the pain that fills our world, all who seek liberation must strive like Weil to redefine rather than reassign power. And, as Richard notes, we must open ourselves to the truth that while the "cross cannot be the last word . . . neither is the resurrection the last word on history. . . . The salvation effected in the death and resurrection of Jesus is something other than the contradiction of our experience of negation."<sup>85</sup> Our experiences of suffering are real and no amount of triumphalism can erase them. While it might be tempting to affirm that kenotic christology is descriptive of the Third World and prescriptive for the First World and liberation theology is the opposite, the relationship is far more complex. The Cross and the Resurrection together speak to us of the paradox that is our salvation. As Simone Weil knew well, it is in the self-emptying of Christ that we come to see the very face of a God who loves, and it is in true imitation of Christ's letting go that we ourselves will don the face of God.

### Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, preface, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, by Simone Weil (New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1987) vi.
2. Simone Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973) 83.
3. David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990) 1.

4. Eliot, p. xi.
5. Debra J. Jensen, "Self, Identity and Gender in the Life and Work of Simone Weil," *Grail* 12. 2 (June 1996): 77.
6. Richard H. Bell, ed., *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 5.
7. J. B. Hall, rev. of *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49.1 (1996): 123.
8. Richard Rees, ed. and trans., *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).
9. Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).
10. In addition, Weil herself wrote, "To write the lives of the great in separating them from their works necessarily ends by above all stressing their pettiness, because it is in their work that they have put the best of themselves." (Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes*, II [Gallimard: Paris, 1988] 351.) Epigraph to *Utopian Pessimist*.
11. Several biographies are available for those who are interested in studying about her life in further detail. Simone Pétrement's *Simone Weil: A Life* is the "definitive" biography written by Weil's friend (see note 9). More recent investigations into her life and thought include Robert Coles' *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage*, Radcliffe Biography Series (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987); Peter Winch's *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Gabriella Fiori's *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); David McLellan's *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990); Thomas R. Nevin's *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); and Stephen Plant's *Simone Weil*, Great Christian Thinkers Ser., ed. Peter Vardy (Ligouri, MO: Triumph, 1996).
12. Eliot, v.
13. McLellan, 2.
14. Simone Weil, "Contradiction," *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952) 156.
15. *Ibid.*, 152.
16. Pétrement, 27.
17. *Ibid.*, 28.
18. "Rome is the Great Beast of atheism and materialism, adoring nothing but itself. Israel is the Great Beast of religion. Neither one is likeable." (Weil, "The Great Beast," *Gravity and Grace*, 219.)
19. McLellan, 197.
20. Pétrement, 27.
21. *Ibid.*, 22. Cf. Weil, "Love," *Gravity and Grace*, 116-117; "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 200-208.
22. Simone Weil, "Letter to Maurice Schumann, 1943(?)," *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters*, ed.

- and trans. Richard Rees, 178.
23. Ursula King, "Starting with Oneself: Spiritual Confessions. 8. Simone Weil: *Waiting on God*," *The Expository Times* 101.10 (July 1990): 293.
  24. Pétrement, 97.
  25. Weil, "Letter to a Pupil, 1935," *Seventy Letters*, 13.
  26. Gustave Thibon, introduction, *Gravity and Grace*, 12.
  27. King, 295.
  28. Weil, "Letter to Albertine, 1935," *Seventy Letters*, 21.
  29. Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," *Waiting for God*, 67.
  30. Weil, "Letter to Georges Bernanos, 1938," *Seventy Letters*, 106.
  31. Weil, "Letter to Joë Bousquet, 1942," *Seventy Letters*, 140.
  32. Pétrement, 391.
  33. Weil, "Letter to Jean Wahl, 1942," *Seventy Letters*, 160.
  34. *Ibid.*, 158.
  35. Weil, "Letter to Maurice Schumann, 1942," *Seventy Letters*, 156.
  36. Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 9.
  37. Weil, "Letter to Maurice Schumann, 1943(?)," 178.
  38. *Ibid.* Her earlier words to Bousquet take on new meaning in light of her death: "Fortunate are those in whom the affliction which enters their flesh is the same one that afflicts the world itself in their time." (Weil, "Letter to Joë Bousquet, 1942," 137.)
  39. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 364.
  40. A few commentators have begun to investigate further the similarities between anorexic girls and Weil. See Judith Van Herik, "Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil," *Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil*, eds. Thomas Idinopulous and Josephine Zadovsky (Johnson City, TN: Institute of Social Sciences and Arts, 1984) 57-90 and Val Webb, "Simone Weil: Theologian and Mystic—Anorexic Woman," *Daughters of Sarah* (Fall 1993): 36-40.
  41. Eliot, vii.
  42. Rita Nakashima Brock, "Feminist Theories," *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 117.
  43. Rosemary Ruether, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age," *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, eds. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 73.
  44. See Weil, "Concerning the Our Father," *Waiting for God*, 220-222.
  45. Lucy Bregman, "The Barren Fig Tree: Simone Weil and the Problem of Feminine Identity," *Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil*, 109.
  46. *Ibid.*, 92.
  47. Simone Weil, "Come with Me," *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977) 411.

48. "In the morning when [Jesus] returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once" (Matthew 21:18-19. Cf. Mark 11:12-14).
49. Weil, "Last Thoughts," *Waiting for God*, 100.
50. Qtd. in Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage*, 126.
51. Pheme Perkins, "Philippians," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 344.
52. Bregman, 92.
53. These two collections, however, do not represent the broad range of Weil's writings, which cover philosophy, politics, mathematics, etc.
54. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *Waiting for God*, 119-120.
55. Thomas Idinopulous, preface, *Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil*, iii.
56. Weil, "Affliction," *Gravity and Grace*, 132.
57. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *Waiting for God*, 122.
58. Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," *Waiting for God*, 69.
59. Weil, "Contradictions," *Gravity and Grace*, 155.
60. Weil, "Letter to Joë Bousquet, 1942," 141.
61. Lucien Richard, O.M.I., *A Kenotic Christology: In the Humanity of Jesus the Christ, the Compassion of Our God* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982) 238.
62. Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 145.
63. Weil, "Self-Effacement," *Gravity and Grace*, 88.
64. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 123.
65. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *Waiting for God*, 119.
66. *Ibid.*, 123.
67. *Ibid.*, 123-124.
68. *Ibid.*, 127.
69. Weil, "To Desire Without an Object," *Gravity and Grace*, 68. Although it might be tempting to view her death, caused in part by self-starvation, as a form of decreation, J. P. Little makes a good case against such an understanding. Weil maintained that one could not seek affliction, for decreation means abandoning "I-centered acts of will." (Cf. J. P. Little, "Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation," *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*, 37-38.)
70. All quotes are from Leonore Fleischer's novel *Shadowlands* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) which is based on the screenplay by William Nicholson. It is now a Richard Attenborough film starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger.
71. Weil, "Affliction," *Gravity and Grace*, 134.
72. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *Waiting for God*, 127.
73. *Ibid.*, 131.
74. Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 157.
75. Weil, "Intelligence and Grace," *Gravity and Grace*, 182.

76. Weil, "Necessity and Obedience," *Gravity and Grace*, 97.
77. Little, 43.
78. Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 139.
79. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *Waiting for God*, 123.
80. Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 147.
81. Weil, "To Accept the Void," *Gravity and Grace*, 55.
82. Coles, xix.
83. King, 295.
84. In contrast, Weil's "influence" around the time of Vatican II was "considerable." Both Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI greatly admired her. (See McLellan, 268.)
85. Lucien Richard, O.M.I., *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 23.